

An Introduction to the Sociological Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

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I. Introduction

It is well known that the Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism (hereafter abbreviated as “SI”), in which the works of Herbert George Blumer (1900-87) are represented, played an important role in the “Chicago Renaissance.”^{□ 4} SI was critical to both structural-functionalism, as established by T. Parsons and his followers, and sociological positivism, in which G. A. Lundberg was a central figure.[□] Therefore, efforts of SI were focused on developing an alternative sociological perspective or conceptual framework and a new and appropriate research methodology. SI’s emphasis on the conceptual understanding of “Society as Dynamic Processes” has been influential in the Japanese sociological community. “Society as Dynamic Processes” characterizes human society as constantly constructed and reconstructed by “active individuals,” or as constantly in the process of change.

This article examines the conceptual status of “Society as Dynamic Processes” from the standpoint of the fundamental problem in sociology, namely, that of the relationship between the individual and society. More specifically, we have attempted to answer the following three questions:

- 1) How does SI understand socialization?
- 2) How does SI understand *Vergesellschaftung*?^{□ 6}
- 3) Why must human society be understood as “in process of change” according to SI analysis?^{□ 7}

Previous SI studies by sociologists in Japan have given insufficient attention to this key issue.^{□ 8}

The three questions mentioned above should be answered with the focus on a central concept of SI,

^{□ 1} This article is the revised edition of the following paper: T. Kuwabara and K. Yamaguchi, 2013, An Introduction to the Sociological Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism: Revised Edition, *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, 80: 115-25 [<http://hdl.handle.net/10232/16983>].

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^{□ 4} C.f. R. E. L. Faris, [1967]1970, *Chicago Sociology: 1920-1932*, The University of Chicago Press, vii-xii.

^{□ 5} C.f. H. G. Blumer, 1930, Review of Lundberg’s *Social Research*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 35: 1101-11.

^{□ 6} This term was originally coined as a sociological term by G. Simmel.

^{□ 7} One of the authors has considered this as the fundamental problem of “SI” since 1997. See the following article: T. Kuwabara, 1997, The conception of society in Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism Reconsidered, *Culture*, 60 (3-4): 55-72 [<http://hdl.handle.net/10232/6937>].

^{□ 8} See the following article for an exceptional instance: K. Uchida, 1996, The Micro-Macro Problem: An Interactionist Approach, *Waseda Studies in Human Sciences*, 9 (1): 101-13.

“self-interaction” or “interaction with oneself.” Thus, it can be said that efforts to solve the basic sociological problem should focus on the concept of “self-interaction.”

II. Action through Self-interaction

In this section, we have attempted to answer the first question regarding the meaning of “socialization” according to SI. In addition, it has clarified how SI understands the “relationship between the individual and the world” and “action.”

In SI, “self-interaction” is defined as the process whereby an actor interacts with himself/herself, or as a form of communication whereby the actor talks and responds to himself/herself. That is to say, self-interaction is the internalized equivalent of social interaction with “others.” Self-interaction is a form of social interaction, which usually involves other people; in this case, however, it is carried out alone.

From the perspective of SI, self-interaction is synonymous with the “process of interpretation,” which has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself/herself a set of “things” that carry personal meanings (the step of “indication”); second, he/she interprets these meanings by selecting, checking, suspending, regrouping, and transforming them in the light of both the situation in which he/she is placed and the direction of his/her action (the step of “interpretation”).

It has been argued that SI’s theory of “self-interaction” does not differ from “subjective nominalism,” which proposes that autonomous individuals function in society while never becoming products of society.^{□ 9} Many sociologists, such as J. D. Lewis,^{□ 10} have made this criticism for some time. The argument by Lewis is particularly noteworthy. The second section of this article includes a counterargument to his criticism.

Given “self-interaction” as the central concept, “socialization” (according to SI) is the process whereby.^{□ 11}

1) An actor derives “schemes of definition” and “generalized roles” from “groups of others”^{□ 12} to which

^{□ 9} 1970s and 80s have brought many criticisms toward the SI perspective. Therefore, SI needed to reconsider and re-develop its perspective and method in response to the criticisms. Among those criticisms, two of them have become common and popular as the labels characterizing SI theory. That is, on the one hand, SI has been seen as one of subjectivist theories, and on the other hand, it has been called micro-sociology by its very nature. In sum, there are four challenges facing SI: i) theorizing the influences of social structures on self-interaction; ii) theorizing the influences of self-interaction on social structures; iii) theorizing the social structure itself; and iv) consideration of the approach from the “standpoint of the actor” in relationship to the macro-sociological version of SI’s perspective.

^{□ 10} J. D. Lewis, 1976, The Classic American Pragmatists as Forerunners to Symbolic Interactionism, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 17: 347-59.

^{□ 11} H. G. Blumer, [1977]1992, Comment on Lewis’ “The Classic American Pragmatists as Forerunners to Symbolic Interactionism,” P. Hamilton (ed.), *George Herbert Mead Critical Assessments*, vol. 2, Routledge, p. 154.

^{□ 12} In our judgement, “groups of others” can be considered to be synonymous with “reference groups as perspectives” in Shibutani’s famous article: T. Shibutani, 1955, Reference Groups as Perspectives, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 60 (6): 562-9.

he/she belongs.

- 2) The actor's interpretation or definition during social interactions in which he/she is participating is guided by the two frameworks identified in (1).
- 3) "Schemes of definition" serve to canalize the actor's social actions during social interactions with others, and "generalized roles" provide outlets for directing the actor's actions in self-interactions.

Thus, "interpretation/definition" is understood as the following process: (a) the acquisition of "generalized roles," (b) acquisition of "schemes of definition," (c) scrutiny of "schemes of definition" through self-interaction, which is guided by "generalized roles," and (d) perception of an environment using the new "schemes of definition" resulting from the scrutiny in "step (c)." This social phenomenon is known as "conferring of meaning" according to SI. The environment, as in (d), is called the "world of reality," or the "world that is out there."¹³

SI conceives of "human beings" as existences surrounded by an environment, which is composed of a variety of "things." "Things" are considered to be "existence without substance of any kind." The "world" is created by human beings through making "objects" for themselves from the world of reality by means of "conferring of meaning." In SI, this act is synonymous with perception as organized by means of "perspectives" (i.e., "schemes of definition" and "generalized roles"). Therefore, an object is conceived as a portion or an aspect of the world of reality, which a human being has created via his/her perspectives. SI divides objects into three categories: "physical objects," "social objects," and "abstract objects."¹⁴

The "world" for any human being is an area consisting only of these objects. Human beings are understood as entities living within their respective worlds of this kind. Hence, SI proposes that the "relationship between the individual and the world" is established by the interpretation or definition (= "conferring of meaning" or "perception") of the world of reality by human beings (individuals) via successive processes of self-interaction.

However, SI has never considered "the relationship" referred above to be "fixed" only by the one-sided interpretation of an individual. According to SI, the world of reality interpreted by the individual is capable of "resisting" or "talking back" to his/her interpretation or definition; even the individual cannot be sure if his/her interpretations have validity, he/she can judge the validity of definitions from this "resistance" or "talking back."¹⁵ If the interpretations prove to be invalid, they are then modified. Thus, in SI, the "relationship between the individual and the world" must be understood as the relationship that can be formed and re-formed *continually* based on *continuous* interaction or interplay between the interpretation or

¹³ Blumer, [1977]1992, op. cit., pp. 154-5.

¹⁴ H. G. Blumer, 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Prentice Hall, pp. 10-1.

¹⁵ According to Blumer, "[there] is a world of reality 'out there' that stands over against human beings and that is capable of resisting actions toward it" and "[the] resistance of the world to perceptions of it is the test of the validity of the perceptions" (H. G. Blumer, [1980]1992, Mead and Blumer: *The Convergent Methodological Perspectives of Social Behaviorism and Symbolic Interactionism*, Hamilton (ed.), op. cit., p. 165).

definition by the individual and talking back from the world of reality.^{□16} Hence, SI maintains that this relationship must not be considered to be fixed only by the one-sided interpretation of the individual.

Keeping the point of the “relationship between the individual and the world” in mind, we have tried to clarify SI’s concept of “action”—an “individual act.”

According to SI, first and foremost, an action is understood as an actor’s activity of “fitting” or “adjusting” to the world of reality. As a result, the relationship between the individual (the actor) and the world is continually formed and re-formed in the wake of talking back from the world of reality. SI conceptualizes this process as a sequence of units consisting of: 1) “impulse,” 2) “perception,” 3) “manipulation,” 4) “consummation.”^{□17} This process is not, of course, terminated after just one cycle; rather, it must be thought of as a perpetual cycling of the four units, as in, 1) “*impulse (1),*” → 2) “*perception (1),*” → 3) “*manipulation (1),*” → 4) “*consummation (1),*” → 5) “*impulse (2),*” → 6) “*perception (2),*” → 7) “*manipulation (2),*” → 8) “*consummation (2),*” ----→ *n*) “*impulse (n),*” and so on.

III. Society as Joint Actions

In this section, we have attempted to answer the second question regarding how actors are constructing societies.

SI explains social interaction as a mutual presentation or an interconversion of actions by actors; such interactions have been classified into two categories: “symbolic interaction” and “non-symbolic interaction.” The former is mediated by self-interaction, but the latter is not. According to Mead’s terminology, symbolic interaction is the equivalent of the “use of significant symbols.” Non-symbolic interaction is the equivalent of Mead’s “conversation of gestures.” However, greater precision in our analysis of SI demonstrated the existence of at least two types of *symbolic interaction*, that are distinctly different from each other: symbolic interaction in which significant symbols do not yet exist but participants in the interaction are trying to call them into being, and symbolic interaction mediated by significant symbols called into being by participants during a preceding interaction (i.e., “use of significant symbols”). The latter is called “a real form of interaction.”

In SI, “society” or “human society” is understood as consisting of “a real form of interactions.” This type of interaction is called “joint action” or “transaction,” and it is equivalent to the “use of significant symbols.”

Therefore, “human society” is conceptualized as a series of joint actions that are tightly or loosely interlinked with each other “in a timeline and in space.” As Blumer said, “Joint action not only represents a

^{□16} See the following literature for the difference of meanings between the words of “continual” and “continuous”: A. L. Strauss, 1959[1997], *Mirrors and Masks*, Transaction Publishers, p. 27.

^{□17} H. G. Blumer, 1993, L. H. Athens (ed.), Blumer’s Advanced Course on Social Psychology, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 14, pp. 188-91.

horizontal linkage, so to speak, of the activities of the participants, but also a vertical linkage with previous joint action.”¹⁸ Joint action, thus, is “the fundamental unit of society. Its analysis, accordingly, [exposes] the generic nature of society.”¹⁹

Joint action is formed through symbolic interaction. That is, participants or interactants construct the real form of interaction through symbolic interaction. In SI, symbolic interaction is formulated as a presentation of “gestures” and a response to the meanings of the gestures. The meanings of the gestures have three components: they signify what an interactant to whom the gestures are directed is to do, what another interactant who is presenting the gestures plans to do, and the form of joint action that is to emerge from the articulation of the acts of the interactants. For example, “a robber’s command to his[/her] victim to put up his[/her] hands [= a kind of gestures] is (a) an indication of what the victim is to do; (b) an indication of what the robber plans to do, that is, relieve the victim of his[/her] money; and (c) an indication of the joint [action] being formed, in this case a holdup.”²⁰ A state of “mutual understanding” occurs when the gestures have the same meanings for both interactants--the one who has presented the gestures and the other to whom they have been addressed. In this situation, “significant symbols” or “common definitions” are shared by the interactants, indicating that each interactant is applying the *same* meanings to the “gestures,” through individual processes of self-interaction.

Joint actions can take place only when significant symbols or common definitions exist among interactants. In turn, common definitions can exist only when each interactant practices “taking into account of taking into account”²¹--a form of self-interaction. This process will enable the interactants to grasp or assume properly the “standpoint of the other” and view “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other.” To grasp these two “standpoints” makes “common definitions” possible. SI proposes that a proper grasp of these two “standpoints” is possible only if interpretations or definitions are directed by interpretive instruments such as *perspectives* (i.e., “schemes of definition” and “generalized roles”). The interactants have already obtained such perspectives from “groups of others.” Additionally, from the SI perspective, only in the presence of common definitions can “the regularity, stability, and repetitiveness of joint action”²² be maintained.

¹⁸ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁹ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 70.

²⁰ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 9.

²¹ The concept “taking into account of taking into account” is the famous term used by N. Luhmann, but it was originally formulated by Blumer himself in 1953. Luhmann coined this term in reference to Blumer’s following statement: “[In social interactions] [one] has to catch the other as a subject, or in terms of his being the initiator and director of his acts; thus one is led to identify what the person means, what are his intentions and how he may act. Each party to the interaction does this and thus *not only takes the other into account, but takes him into account as one who, in turn, is taking him into account*” (Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 109). Emphasis by quoters.

²² Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 71.

IV. Society as Dynamic Processes

In this fourth section, we address the third problem: the nature of human society is one of unpredictable continual transformation.

SI has emphasized that human society as a series of joint actions must have a career or a history; its career is generally orderly, fixed, and repetitious, by virtue of its participants' common identification in joint action. The overall career must, however, be viewed as "open to many possibilities of uncertainty."²³

Why must joint action or society be understood as having the character of being open to many possibilities of uncertainty? Answering this question with the focus on the concept of "self-interaction," which, we attempt to prove, necessarily implies that continuous regularity, stability, and repetitiveness of joint actions (human society) are practically and logically, impossible. In other words, any kind of "common definition" cannot keep its given form continuously.

In SI, a condition in which a certain common definition is maintained implies a situation in which a certain significant symbol is maintained among interactants. This situation can be described as a state in which an interactant sees a gesture that he/she presents identically as it is *being* seen by those to whom it is addressed.²⁴ To maintain this state, the interactant who presents the gesture must interpret and define properly, through a process of self-interaction, the "two standpoints" of the other interactant or "alter ego" to whom the gesture is addressed. Moreover, the validity of his/her interpretation or definition must be continuously maintained. But this is impossible, because of the nature of the "alter ego" or "other."

As we have seen in section II, SI interprets the "worlds" that exist for human beings as areas that consist only of "objects." Therefore, "others," as they exist for each individual, must be included in the category/concept of "social object." Objects are, as we have said, a part of the world of reality that is seen by the individual from his/her perspectives. Therefore, it can be said that the object is, on one hand, a *percept* created by the individual, and, on the other hand, something that continues to exist undeniably within the world of reality. How, then, is the nature of the world of reality grasped? As clarified in section II, SI proposes that the world of reality interpreted by the individual has continuous possibilities of talking back to his/her interpretation or definition, and the individual can thereby know whether his/her interpretation has validity or not. If the individual's interpretation is found to be invalid, the given interpretation will be modified. This means that SI understands that interpretation always has the possibility of being formed and modified from moment to moment.

From this framework, it follows that the individual/actor cannot use the same interpretation or definition of a given object continuously. Therefore, because the "other" is categorized as an object and part of the

²³ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 71.

²⁴ Blumer, 1993, op. cit., p. 179.

world of reality, it follows that the “other” interpreted by the actor has continuous possibilities of talking back to the actor’s interpretation or definition. Furthermore, it also follows that the actor/individual cannot give the same interpretation or definition to the “other” with whom he/she is engaged in interactions/joint actions. The “other” or “alter ego” for the individual exists forever as a “black box.”²⁵ That is, the individual can never see the other *in the raw*, i.e., in his/her true colors.²⁶

In summary, in SI, it is impossible to sustain a particular form of any common definition forever. *Forever*, for “the nature of the other” (i.e., its black boxness) does not allow an actor to continue to use the same interpretation/definition, or to attribute a particular meaning through a process of self-interaction, permanently. The “other” has continuous possibilities of talking back to the actor, and the resultant need of the actor to change or modify any given interpretation or definition (i.e., meaning) persists endlessly. Hence, any common definition must be re-formed eventually, and any joint action must be re-formed as well.

V. Research Act as Symbolic Interaction

This section concerns the problem of finding a suitable research methodology for examining the “standpoint of the actor,” as the means for testing empirically the SI model of society “Society as Dynamic Processes,” laid out in the previous sections.

In section II, III, and IV, we described the SI model of human society. First, “human society” has been conceptualized as a system of interlinked social interactions by interactants; in reality, human society exists only as “a real form of interactions” (i.e., “transactions” or “joint actions”). In SI, social interaction is the fundamental unit of society, and it exposes society’s *generic*²⁷ nature. To understand society, we need only to study this “real form of interaction” (the initial hypothesis of SI for the study of society).

The model of social interaction described in the previous sections can be summarized as interaction in which interactants with the nature of *black boxness* for other interactants perform “taking into account of taking into account” as a form of self-interaction in order to grasp or define properly both the “standpoint of the other” and “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other.” Thus social interaction is a social process in

²⁵ This term was originally coined as a sociological term by Luhmann. One of the authors has thought of his theory as a developed version of SI since 2008, in the wake of Mamoru Funatsu. See the following papers: Funatsu, 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 10; T. Kuwabara and S. Okuda, 2008, References on Symbolic Interactionism: Vol. I, *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, 69 [http://hdl.handle.net/10232/8117], p. 62.

²⁶ As J. M. Charon says, “[objects] may exist in physical form, but for the human being they are seen not ‘in the raw,’ but only through a perspective of some kind” (J. M. Charon, 1989, *Symbolic Interactionism: an introduction, an interpretation, an integration, 3rd edition*, Prentice Hall, p. 37). In SI, every object for all kinds of people which includes *others* must be seen as a kind of hypotheses carved out psychologically or/and socially.

²⁷ As to the word “generic,” the following article is suggestive: K. Uchida, 2004, The “Width” of Knowledge / the “Depth” of Knowledge: A Sketch of H. Blumer’s Discussion on the Genericness of Concepts, *Society and Culture*, 2: 1-14.

which each interactant must guess two things by “taking into account of taking into account”: “From what standpoint are others perceiving the world?” and “How are my perspectives being grasped by others?” Additionally, because of the nature of *black boxness* that characterizes all interactants with respect to each other, they are forced necessarily into re-defining their situations (fellows); thus, their interactions or their joint actions must change in form. These possibilities of “change” continue *ad infinitum*.

We discussed the concept of social interaction earlier in this article. *The concept* should be categorized as a “sensitizing concept” in terms of SI’s methodology. Therefore, it must not be taken as a self-evident truth or a *a priori* assumption on which a grand theory can be built by a purely deductive approach. Instead, it must be understood as merely a hypothesis or tentative proposition whose validity must be tested empirically. The approach to empirical testing recommended by SI is as follows: “One moves out from [a] concept to the concrete distinctiveness of [an] instance[,] instead of embracing the instance in the abstract framework of the concept.”²⁸

SI has promoted “naturalistic inquiry” as the ideal research method for the social sciences. This means a “*continuing interaction* between guiding ideas and empirical observation.”²⁹ The “inquiry” is “naturalistic,” because it is “directed to a given empirical world in its *natural*, ongoing character[,]” instead of “to a simulation of such a world, or to an abstraction from it (as in the case of laboratory experimentation), or to a substitute for the world in the form of a present image of it.”³⁰

The methodology of naturalistic inquiry is a continual testing and revising of the concepts with respect to the investigator’s subject of research through empirical observation. A logical question, therefore, is “How can the investigator know whether or not the given concepts of the subject of research are valid?” That is, how does SI envision the process of testing and revising? In SI terms, the process is considered to be possible by way of the “resisting” or talking back—one form of which is the “occurrence of negative cases”—, from the “empirical world” under study, to the concepts of the investigator.

What, then, is the methodological position of the investigator when carrying out the naturalistic inquiry with the concepts of social interaction (i.e., “root images” of SI) laid out in sections II-IV? The *position* assumed is identical to the *approach from the “standpoint of the actor.”* The investigator must engage in the same activity as that of the interactant described in SI theory.

This fifth section illustrates the problems, and the points to be considered, when actually employing this approach to research.

The study of society from the “standpoint/position of the actor” requires the investigator to take on the role of the actor under study and see “his/her own world from his/her standpoint.” An “actor” refers to both an

²⁸ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 149.

²⁹ Blumer, [1977]1992, op. cit., p. 154.

³⁰ Blumer, 1969, op. cit., p. 46. Emphasis by quoters.

individual and a *group*. For clarity, SI often uses the term “acting unit.”³¹ Thus, one determination to be made is whether the “group” can be properly placed within the category or concept of the “acting unit.”

Whether the “acting unit” consists of an individual or a group, its activities must be equally understood as the products of its own interpretive processes. The assertion of SI is that even in cases where the “acting unit” represents a group, one must adopt the approach from the “standpoint of the actor” and “take the role of the acting unit.” However, the analysis by one of the authors³² made it clear that SI did not explain persuasively and systematically how it was possible for the investigator to take the role of an *entire* group.³³ The analysis above indicates that only an individual can be included in the category of “acting unit” for the approach from the “standpoint of the actor.”³⁴

Another question to be investigated is, “Can we take the role of the acting unit *in the raw*?”

Supposing that social interactions occur between two interactants, then, the two interactants are considered to be engaged in the “taking into account of taking into account” (a form of self-interaction) to grasp the “standpoint of the other” and “one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other.” Further, each of the two interactants has the nature of *black boxness* for the other. Thus, when an investigator attempts to study social interaction from the standpoint of an actor/interactant, the investigator must take into account the assumption that the interactants can never know the real identity of each other; the investigator must build the research method or methodology to be compatible with this assumption. As a result, as Glaser and Strauss said, “delimiting an awareness context [or the degree of mutual understanding] requires always that the sociologist ascertain independently the awareness of each interactant. The safest method is to obtain data, through observation or interview, from each interactant on his/[her] own state of awareness. To accept the word of only one informant is risky, even perhaps for the open awareness context.”³⁵

It must also be borne in mind that an “investigator” who studies social interaction becomes one of *the actors or acting units* on the same level as the two interactants studied. Therefore, an act of studying or a “research act”³⁶ by the investigator must also be understood as *one of the interpretive processes*, and it must

³¹ C.f. D. R. Maines and T. J. Morrione, 1990, On the Breadth and Relevance of Blumer’s Perspective: Introduction to his Analysis of Industrialization, H. G. Blumer, Maines and Morrione (ed.), *Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change*, Aldine, xv-xvi.

³² C.f. T. Kuwabara, 2012, The Methodological Position of Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism, *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, 79: 19-32 [http://hdl.handle.net/10232/14999].

³³ C.f. T. Kuwabara and A. Kihara, 2010, The potential of Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism, *Journal of the Doctorate Studies in Social Sciences*, 7: 237-49 [http://hdl.handle.net/10232/8983].

³⁴ According to Mamoru Funatsu, however, Blumer’s theory on “social problems” based on SI has a potential for making significant contributions to developing a macro theory of SI. See following three articles: M. Funatsu, 1990, Interpretative Approach to Social Problems, *The Study of Sociology*, 55: 155-74; T. Kuwabara, 2012, Toward the Clarification of the Concept of “Media Harassment” [http://hdl.handle.net/10232/19778]; H. G. Blumer, 1971, Social Problems as Collective Behavior, *Social Problems*, 18: 298-306.

³⁵ B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss, [1964]1970, Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction, G. P. Stone and H. A. Farberman (ed.), *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, Xerox College Publishing, p. 338.

³⁶ N. K. Denzin, 1970, The Methodologies of Symbolic Interaction: A Critical Review of Research Techniques, Stone and Farberman (ed.), op. cit., pp. 447-65.

be recognized that the interaction between the investigator and the investigated is, equally, in the category of “symbolic interaction.” Even for the investigator, the two interactants whose roles are under study also have the character of *black boxness*. For this reason, although the research act involves taking the standpoint of the actor, it never means taking *directly* the *standpoint in the raw*. The standpoint of the actor as taken by an investigator can only be the “reconstruction of constructions.”³⁷

How, then, can the investigator relativize this “reconstruction of constructions” and test its validity? The obvious answer to this question derived from SI theory, that the investigator can do this in the light of talking back from an empirical world, is unsatisfactory. It is too incomplete for practical use in sociological research.

One of the major issues for future work is the development of testing standards to verify empirically the SI conception of social interaction or its model of society, namely, “Society as Dynamic Processes.”³⁸

VI. Summary

The main purpose of this study was to examine the theory of SI from the following viewpoints:

- a) How does SI explain the concept of socialization, i.e., the process in which hominids become human beings?
- b) How does SI explain the concept of *Vergesellschaftung*, i.e., the process or mechanism through which people construct human society?
- c) Why is human society to be considered to be a changeable process?

After careful examination, the following findings were made:

- i) SI regards socialization as the process in which the two frameworks or perspectives (schemes of definition and generalized roles) that have been acquired by an actor through interactions with groups of others guide his/her interpretations/definitions.
- ii) In SI theory, society is seen to be possible only when each of the actors in interactions can properly grasp the two standpoints (that of the other and one’s own standpoint in the eyes of the other) by doing a kind of self-interaction (i.e., taking into account of taking into account).
- iii) Because of the nature of others (*black boxness*), all the actors interacting with others are seen to be necessarily forced to revise their interpretations/definitions continually. For this reason, society must be

³⁷ N. Tokugawa, 2001, The “Individual and Collaborative Character” of Narrative Actions, T. Kitamura et al. (ed.), *The Renaissance of Human Beings in 21st Century*, Hassakusha, p. 129.

³⁸ One of the authors has attempted this tasks: K. Yamaguchi, 2008, Toward an Empirical Study of “the Manner of Conviviality,” *The Study of Sociology*, 83: 133-55; Yamaguchi and H. Lee, 2009, The Strategy of an “Intimate” Public Sphere: A Case Study on “Dialogue” as a Social Connection between Zainichi-Koreans and Japanese, *Proceedings of 1st Next-Generation Global Workshop*, Kyoto University GCOE Program, pp. 107-14; Yamaguchi, 2010, A Case Study on the Communication Mode between Zainichi-Koreans and Japanese, *Proceedings of 2nd Next-Generation Global Workshop*, Kyoto University GCOE Program, pp. 129-37.

regarded as a changeable process.

Finally, we have tried to review critically the research method of SI (i.e., the approach from the “standpoint of the actor”) on the basis of the conception of society that has been clarified in this article.

Our review provides evidence for the two additional points listed below:

- iv) In doing the approach from the “standpoint of the actor,” only an individual can be included into the category of the acting unit.
- v) The standpoint of the actor perceived by researchers must never be seen as the standpoint *in the raw* but has to be seen as a kind of *reconstruction of constructions* created by researchers.

We finally have confirmed that testing this conception of society (i, ii, and iii noted above) empirically, based on the points iv and v, would (and must) be one of our important tasks in future.

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